

# Storytelling and Storybooks: a Broader Version of the Communicative Approach

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## **Abstract**

Many TESEP teachers in France have experimented with aspects of the communicative approach, but favour what BANA professionals would describe as traditional methodologies as these are more appropriate to their day-to-day teaching conditions: large classes which need to be kept under control, rigid syllabuses, limited time and resources and specific exam procedures. When foreign languages were introduced into primary schools in 1989 there was no specified syllabus or exam to prepare pupils for. This allowed, perhaps, a greater freedom to experiment with different methodologies and materials in order to select the most appropriate. Storytelling and storybooks have been seen as one approach and is popular in France as well as in many other parts of the world. This paper argues that storytelling and storybooks offer a methodology which is appropriate for many different TESEP contexts because of its familiarity and universality, and can be defined in Holliday's terms as *a broader version of the communicative approach*. The paper then goes on to describe a teacher training session.

*Beaucoup de professeurs en France ont pratiqué certains aspects de l'approche communicative mais ils préfèrent ce que les professionnels BANA qualifieraient de méthodologies traditionnelles parce qu'elles sont plus appropriées à leurs conditions de travail quotidiennes: des classes nombreuses qu'ils doivent tenir en main, des programmes stricts, du temps et un matériel limité et des modalités d'examen particulières. Lorsque les langues étrangères ont été introduites à l'école primaire en 1989, les élèves n'avaient pas de programmes à suivre ou d'examens à préparer. Cela a sans doute permis d'expérimenter plus librement les méthodes et les matériels pédagogiques et de sélectionner les plus appropriés. Raconter et lire des histoires est considéré comme l'une des approches possibles car elle est populaire en France et dans beaucoup d'autres pays du monde. Cet article soutient que cette méthodologie convient à de nombreux contextes TESEP différents parce qu'elle est familière et universelle et qu'on peut la définir, pour reprendre l'expression de Holliday, comme une forme élargie de l'approche communicative. Il relate ensuite une session de formation de professeurs.*

### **The universality of storytelling and stories**

**E**veryone is familiar with stories and most people like listening to and telling them. Universals such as similarities in theme and structure and their power to cross time, geographical boundaries and cultures, facilitate comprehension. This is why many parents and teachers use storytelling and storybooks to help children learn and enrich their mother tongue. The overall educational value of storytelling and using storybooks is undisputed throughout the world (Hester 1983, Garvie 1990, Ellis and Brewster 1991, JET 1993). It develops pupils' imaginative, cognitive and linguistic competence and, in particular, listening for meaning, inferencing, predicting and vocabulary strategies, and pupils are involved personally, creatively and actively in an all-round, whole curriculum approach. Consequently, it is now a common technique in foreign language classrooms all over the world as teachers have become aware of the full potential of this rich and flexible teaching resource, and have gained the confidence, experience and expertise in using it, either as a supplement or as an alternative to a coursebook.

Storytelling and storybooks are particularly appropriate to the French context as it complies with the three major objectives defined in 1989 by the Ministry of Education Nationale (MEN).

1. **Linguistic.** It allows vocabulary and structures to be presented orally in memorable and meaningful contexts without interference of the written word, and carefully designed related language learning activities ensure valuable language output outcomes.
2. **Psychological.** It provides stimulating and successful learning experiences which help foster positive attitudes towards the language, the people who speak that language and towards language learning. It is very motivating for a child to understand a story in a foreign language and can create the desire to continue learning.
3. **Cultural.** Well-selected storybooks provide opportunities for presenting cultural information and for making cultural comparisons.

### **A flexible and teacher-controlled methodology**

In addition to providing a rich and stimulating resource which offers variety and flexibility, storytelling and storybooks also offer the teacher

- a) an acquisition-based methodology which is teacher-controlled. As the teacher tells or reads a story aloud, pupils listen to the same

thing at the same time, thus facilitating classroom management. As Holliday points out, "communicative activities can take more forms than simply practicing oral communication in pairs and groups" and suggests text-based activities for TESEP classrooms as an alternative: "the texts can have many forms, from recordings of speech, or teachers reading aloud for listening practice". Ellis and Brewster (1991) describe listening to stories in class as "a shared social experience... storytelling provokes a shared response of laughter, sadness, excitement and anticipation". In this way, a genuine communicative situation is provided where pupils interact with the story, the storyteller and each other. Teachers are also providing "optimal input" (Krashen 1982) which is comprehensible, interesting and/or relevant, not constrained by grammatical sequencing and sufficient in quantity and focusses the pupil on the message rather than on form. Later, Nunan (1987) also stresses the importance of meaning for language acquisition. Related language learning activities allow children to focus consciously on specific aspects of the language presented through a story and to transfer it to other situations, thereby offering a balanced approach which develops fluency and accuracy and caters for different learning styles. Such story-related activities could include typical communication activities such as information gap activities, surveys, role-plays, information transfer activities, as well as, grammar discovery activities, problem solving, classifying, gap-filling and so on. Storytelling and storybooks offer a methodology which is teacher-controlled yet provide flexibility and scope for the incorporation of more learner-controlled communicative-type activities depending on classroom contexts and teacher preferences.

- b) Storytelling caters for different teaching styles as styles of telling differ from individual to individual. Although storytelling needs rehearsal each teacher can choose to tell or read a story aloud in the way they prefer and feel the most comfortable. Pupils will be influenced by the teacher's ease and confidence. There are many techniques a storyteller can use to support their pupils' understanding, to help bring the story alive, to involve pupils and so on, and these techniques will come with practice (Ellis and Brewster 1991, Brewster, Ellis and Girard 1992).

- c) Storybooks offer a motivating and flexible resource. What is important is how the teacher exploits the storybooks and the way they are used as a springboard for related language learning activities. In this way, they can cater for a wide variety of pupils in terms of age, level, interests and special needs.

### **Real books or graded books?**

Storytelling and storybooks is not a new technique but, up until quite recently, many of the storybooks used were adapted and simplified versions of popular fairy tales and fables, nursery rhymes, or stories written specifically for the foreign language classroom. These books, commonly referred to as readers, were often produced as a supplement to a particular course book, to be used by the pupil working alone to develop reading skills, rather than by the teacher for storytelling and as the starting point for other related language learning work. Readers are not always as attractive and as engaging as authentic books as the illustrations are often of a poor quality, the language has been selected and graded and may lack cohesion and, consequently, sound unnatural, and the actual stories can be rather dull and boring. However, it is good to see that several publishers are now producing greatly improved readers such as the excellent Footsteps series (Ashworth, Clark 1992) that can also be used for storytelling.

A more recent development is to use carefully selected real books - books that have been written primarily for native-speaker children but which have a great deal of potential in the foreign language learning classroom. These books can be selected from the rich source of existing children's literature and include old and new classics which have become part of children's culture, fairy tales, folk tales, fables. These storybooks stimulate the child's imagination and the text and pictures work together to tell the whole story offering the child high quality art work, a range of subject matter and literary style. However, a criticism often aimed at using real books with foreign language learners is that the language may be too complex and the content too simplistic for the age group they are aimed at. This may be true for some stories, but carefully selected storybooks can be interpreted at many different levels based on the child's own experience and language level. I know teachers who have successfully used *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, first published in 1970, and recently quoted as becoming "an international superstar on the EFL front" (Rixon 1992), with pupils in nursery school, primary school and secondary school. I also know

many adults who still shed a tear at the end of *The Snowman!* Reactions like these reflect classics. They cross generations.

### **Reading or telling?**

Some people are natural storytellers. Most are not but can become good storytellers through practice and by improving their techniques. Reading a story aloud is probably less daunting for most teachers than telling a story which puts an enormous burden upon the memory. When reading a story aloud the teacher has direct access to the text which enables the story to be conveyed more confidently, and the accompanying illustrations play an important role in supporting the child's understanding.

If a storybook is accompanied by a cassette, this can be used as an example of how the story can be read aloud. It is preferable to read a story aloud in the initial stages as this allows a personal, shared contact to be created with the class. It is also possible to stop and ask questions, pause, look at pupils, invite participation, deal with a distracted child and so on when necessary and appropriate. Using a cassette to present a story risks becoming impersonal and mechanical and may result in passive listening. The cassette can be listened to by pupils with activities or for pleasure after the story has been introduced and read by the teacher.

Ideas and suggestions for using storybooks in the classroom can be found in JET, Standpoints and Ellis and Brewster (1991).

### **A training session**

The notes that follow describe a training session on storytelling and storybooks which involve participants in a process of reflection and experimentation. The aims are to:

- demonstrate a three-stage procedure that can be applied to most storybooks
- highlight the full potential of storytelling and storybooks
- demonstrate storytelling techniques
- highlight criteria that can be used when selecting storybooks for the foreign language learning classroom.

The storybook used is 'Meg's Eggs'. Meg is a witch and in this story another of her spells goes wrong when the eggs she makes for supper hatch out as dinosaurs. Dinosaurs have always been popular and recurring characters in

children's literature and, with the release of 'Jurassic Park', there has been a new surge of interest in these fascinating, prehistoric creatures. Pupils' curiosity and imagination can be captured through this story.

### Procedures

1. If appropriate, ask participants if they have used storytelling and storybooks with their pupils. Ask them to comment briefly on what their main objectives were and how their pupils responded in order to elicit some of the reasons for using storytelling and storybooks.
2. Explain the aims of the session, and that you will be asking them to participate sometimes as teachers, sometimes as pupils.
3. *Stage One: Preparation.*
  - a) Using the front and back covers of the storybook demonstrate how these can be used to introduce the characters, contextualise the story and prepare pupils both for linguist aspects and for some of the content. Explain that questions for eliciting vocabulary may be asked in the target language or mother tongue depending on the language level of the pupils as long as key words are introduced in English.
  - b) Ask participants to think of ways they could link the story to something their pupils know already or have done recently. For example, another storybook, a history lesson, a visit to a museum, a film and so on.
  - c) Explain that it is reasonable to assume that pupils will probably know a lot about dinosaurs in their mother tongue. In order to activate this knowledge and to get them to transfer it to the target language, show them the quiz (see Fig. 1). Do this quickly and ask whether they enjoyed it and why, to highlight the fact that it was challenging, fun, and interesting as they were learning facts through English. Then discuss classroom management alternatives for implementing the quiz, for example, a teacher - class activity; in pairs or groups; by pupils working individually in class or at home; in a history lesson with the collaboration of the history teacher, or in the mother tongue as long as key words in English are introduced (*dinosaur, egg, Diplodocus, plants, Stegosaurus, Tyrannosaurus, ferocious*). Pupils could be encouraged to use reference books to find out answers.

#### **4. Stage Two: Storytelling.**

- a) Using the front and back covers, revise vocabulary and check who the characters are. Before you read, divide the group into three subgroups and give each subgroup one of the following tasks.

##### **Group 1.**

Note down some of the vocabulary in the story that has not been pre-taught and say why.

##### **Group 2.**

Observe the techniques the storyteller uses to help bring the story alive, to support pupils' understanding and to involve pupils personally and actively.

##### **Group 3.**

Tell participants that you have selected Meg's Eggs because you think it contains many features that makes it suitable for children learning English as a foreign language. What are some of these features?

Now read the story aloud. An alternative is to have someone else read the story or to have a video recording of the story being read aloud to a class.

- b) Ask participants if they enjoyed the story and why. Give each subgroup about five minutes to pool their comments then lead a group discussion.

##### **Group 1. Vocabulary.**

The overall objective of storytelling is to develop listening for general understanding and to develop pupils' inferencing strategies. A great deal of meaning can be inferred through the illustrations and additional support provided by the teacher (mime, gestures, expressions, sound effects, pointing to pictures, asking questions, etc.) (This overlaps with task 2.)

##### **Group 2. Storytelling techniques.**

- a) arranging the class so everyone can hear and see well and to create an atmosphere where pupils can concentrate. If this is not possible, the teacher may need to move around to ensure that everyone can see the illustrations.
- b) reading the story at an appropriate pace (not too fast, not too slow)

giving pupils plenty of time to relate what they hear to what they see

- c) pausing to add dramatic effect, repeating to allow plenty of exposure to the foreign language. Children love hearing stories over and over again which gives them plenty of opportunities to work out meaning, if they didn't understand the first time.
- d) looking up at the class to make eye-contact to create a personal and shared rapport.
- e) involving pupils in the storytelling to encourage participation by repeating key words and expressions (*Who are you? 98 cabbages, 99 cabbages, 100 cabbages, 10 .....*), asking questions to personalise the story, asking questions or giving instructions to check understanding (*Show me the lizard, show me the newt, Can you see Diplodocus? Where is he?* and so on), making comments on the story (*They were very hungry, they were very frightened*) asking questions to encourage prediction (*What do you think Meg's going to do?*)
- f) making the most of your voice (pace, volume, disguising your voice for the different characters, intonation to encourage participation, sound effects and onomatopoeic words)
- g) using your face and body for mime, gestures and for pointing at pictures to support understanding.

Point out that stories can be read effectively in many different ways. Teachers can select the way that suits their own individual style best, but rehearsal is essential.

**Group 3. Features to look for when selecting storybooks.**

- a) content: surprise, suspense, humour, interest
- b) illustrations: uncluttered, bright, vibrant colours corresponding to the text. If possible, show participants an example of a story where, although the illustrations may be very attractive, they may not support children's understanding.
- c) opportunities for involvement, prediction and participation
- d) length: not too long (unless it can be broken up into sections) otherwise it puts too many demands on the children's attention span, and can be tiring for the teacher.

- e) opportunities for follow-up activities where some of the language presented through the story can be transferred to other contexts; comprehension activities, vocabulary expansion, writing, retelling, acting out and so on.

### **5. Stage Three: Story-related follow-up Activities.**

Demonstrate a selection of possible follow-up activities designed to consolidate and extend language introduced through the storybook.

#### **a) *Song. Who are you?* (Fig. 2)**

This practises the question, "Who are you?", the names of the dinosaurs and simple descriptions. It is sung to the tune on the accompanying cassette. Discuss classroom management. For example, after pupils have memorised the tune and the words, the class could be divided into 4 groups, one singing the question and the others replying for each of the dinosaurs to develop concentration. Pupils can also mime actions and make masks to represent the different dinosaurs, depending on time available.

#### **b) *Research and writing.***

This activity requires pupils to classify the dinosaurs according to their type (they may need to use reference books) and to transfer in note form information presented through the story to the chart. They may like to classify other dinosaurs they know.

#### **c) *Writing and drawing.***

Pupils could draw a dinosaur from the story and then transfer the information collated in the chart to write short descriptions in full sentence form. If possible, display the children's work around the classroom which will give them reading practice as they read each others' descriptions. They may also like to draw and describe other dinosaurs of their own choice.

#### **d) *Drama***

Pupils could act out the story.

#### **e) *Making a dinosaur invitation.* (Fig. 3)**

Pupils could make a dinosaur invitation to invite other classes or parents to the play. The message is written inside the invitation.

### Workshop

In order to allow participants to experiment with some of the issues raised, they choose one of the following tasks.

1. Design an activity to prepare pupils linguistically and/or for the content of a story.
2. Rehearse reading a story aloud (either *Meg's Eggs* or another story) and use the self-assessment sheet in Ellis and Brewster (1991). Each participant will need a cassette recorder and blank cassette.
3. Design a follow-up activity.

As can be seen, storytelling and storybooks offers a methodology which is teacher-controlled, yet has the scope for the incorporation of more learner-controlled story-related communicative activities to ensure language output outcomes. It is theoretically justifiable, requires limited resources and offers more than purely language gains. Because of its wide appeal, familiarity and flexibility it can be defined as a "broader version of the communicative approach which has within it the potential to adapt to all types of classroom context, provided it is informed by local knowledge". In order to adapt this methodology and make it "environment-sensitive" most teachers need to be shown the value and techniques of storytelling and of using storybooks, and some may need support with their ability to read a story aloud. This can be achieved through the type of demonstration training session described above, which provides teachers with opportunities for both reflection and experimentation in order to adapt the methodology to their own classroom contexts.

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### The Author

Gail Ellis works freelance, teaching and publishing in the area of primary language teaching.



*Fig. 1 Quizzosaurus*

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. What was a dinosaur?<br>a) a mammal<br>b) a reptile<br>c) a bird                             | 2. When did the first dinosaurs live?<br>a) 1,000 years ago<br>b) 1,000,000 years ago<br>c) 200,000,000 years ago |
| 3. A dinosaur began its life as<br>a) a baby dinosaur<br>b) an egg<br>c) a fossil               | 4. What was the longest dinosaur?<br>a) Tyrannosaurus<br>b) Stegosaurus<br>c) Diplodocus                          |
| 5. What was the most ferocious dinosaur?<br>a) Tyrannosaurus<br>b) Stegosaurus<br>c) Diplodocus | 6. How long was the longest dinosaur?<br>a) 34 metres<br>b) 15 metres<br>c) 28 metres                             |
| 7. What did dinosaurs eat?<br>a) plants<br>b) meat<br>c) insects                                | 8. Why did dinosaurs disappear?<br>a) some new animals ate them all<br>b) the climate got colder<br>c) a disease  |



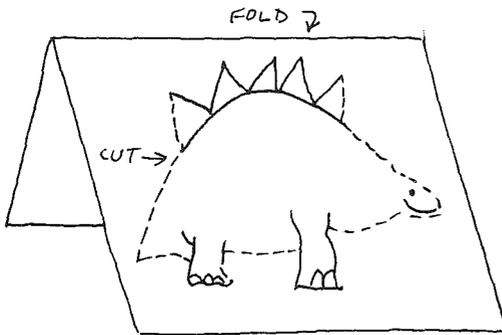
*Fig. 2 Who are you?*

**Who are you? asked Meg**  
I'm Diplodocus  
Very big and very long  
and eats plants all day long.

**Who are you? asked Mog**  
I'm Stegosaurus  
Bony plates along my back  
and eats plants all day long.

**Who are you? asked Owl**  
I'm Tyrannosaurus  
Big and ferocious  
and eatmeat all day long.

*Fig. 3 Dinosaur invitation*



Class \_ \_ \_ \_

invite you to

**MEG'S EGGS**

a dinosaur play

on \_ \_ \_ \_

at \_ \_ \_ \_

**RSVP**